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SUBJECT: THE ROAD TO KHOROG: THE TAJIK/AFGHAN BORDER

REF: A: DUSHANBE 1466; B: DUSHANBE 1460

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11. (SBU) Summary. The 1,344-kilometer Tajik-Afghan border is known for narcotics trafficking, unrelenting mountains, and as a boundary between the former Soviet Union and South Asia. EmbOffs traveled two-thirds of the remote Tajik-Afghan border in the eastern part of the country, finding poverty-stricken villages, emergent interaction between the two countries, and a developing western route for Chinese goods. End Summary.

Bumming Cigarettes on the Afghan Border

12. (U) The road from Khirmanjo to Langar follows the Nizhny Pyanj river 559 km along the Tajik-Afghan border. Steep mountains of brown and gray yield to a narrow fertile valley on either side of the river, where dozens of green villages 25-75 meters in width cling to the river's edge. Three Aga Khan Development Network-funded bridges at Khailakhum, Tem, and Ishkashim, span the river.

13. (SBU) The Pyanj river, which flows south into the Amu Darya river, presents a formidable barrier in many places, while in other areas the gentle flow could be easily crossed. Signs cautioning passers-by of mines populate the Tajik side of the river, although the exact minefield locations are unknown as numerous mudslides have made precise determinations impossible. Several border posts dot the Pyanj, and border guards patrol the road every few kilometers in some areas, while leaving other spots less guarded. Many border guards look smart in their U.S.-provided uniforms and boots, stopping vehicles for contributions and bumming for cigarettes, while others patrol in frayed uniforms. The one-lane road itself ranges from smoothly-paved asphalt or bumpy pavement to pockmarked gravel on precarious mountain edges. On the Afghan side of the river, Afghans with goods-laden donkeys travel a thin path that clings to the side of the mountain. On both sides, few roads lead away from the river.

14. (U) The Saturday cross-border markets at Darvaz, Tem (near Khorog), and Ishkashim are a weekly highlight for nearby villages, and EconOffs were disappointed to find the border crossings closed due to the CIS and Eurasec summits taking place in Dushanbe. According to local Tajiks, Afghans bring small agricultural products, and some Iranian goods such as rice, to

trade at the market. Others have described the markets as Afghans and Tajiks trading Chinese goods.

¶15. (U) The Aga Khan Foundation has active development projects throughout eastern Tajikistan, where the major population are Ismaili Shia Muslims - followers of the Aga Khan. The Aga Khan Development Network is building a \$1 million 150-meter bridge at Vansh, and plans to build a \$500,000 40-meter bridge at Langar, east of Ishkashim, and a \$1.5 million 250-meter bridge at Shagon near Khirmanjo.

Zing

¶16. (U) In the Tajik mountain village of Zing just downstream from the Darvaz border crossing, 165 families survive on remittance income from family members working in Russia, pensions, and family gardens. A shiny mausoleum marks the entrance to the pomegranate and apple tree-lined road. Residents often live over 90 years in this mountain town known for its honey sold in two-liter bottles. Across the river from Zing, Afghans transport goods via donkey along the mountain path to their houses the same shade of brown as the dirt. The Afghan side is within throwing distance of Tajikistan, and EmbOffs watched as an agile Afghan boy clambered off the thin mountain path to retrieve sticks for firewood from further down the mountain.

¶17. (U) Nestled in the mountainous center of the country, Zing receives electricity from the state-owned utility Barqi Tojik in the west and is on a strict rationing regime. Orion Bank is providing the credit for a 1-2 kW mini hydropower plant that will help provide more reliable power to the village. Water flows freely down the mountain, and spring floods often wash large rocks and gravel out onto the road. The town lacks a water supply system, and a local resident, Hairullo, showed EconOffs the hundreds of meters of plastic pipe he bought that carry water from the nearest source.

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The Road to China

¶18. (U) Chinese trucks rumble along the winding roads between Khorog and Darvaz shipping goods from the Kulma Pass north of Darvaz. During summer months, the Kulma Pass border crossing operates 15 days on, 15 days off. The trucks carry construction equipment for the Chinese-funded road projects connecting Dushanbe and Osh, or Dushanbe and Khujand. They also carry consumer goods for local markets. Most of the trucks return to China empty.

¶19. (U) EconOffs could not find a single Chinese trucker who spoke Russian, Tajik, or English, and the Chinese appear to keep to themselves while traveling - bringing their own food and sleeping in their trucks along the side of the road. Some trucks transferred their goods to smaller Tajik Kamaz trucks at the customs terminal in Khorog. Despite the existence of a small truck terminal in Murgab, most of the trucks pass through Murgab, discharge their goods in Khorog, and only return to Murgab with a few leftovers - leaving the markets in Murghab very sparse and almost totally dependant on shipments from Kyrgyzstan (Ref A).

¶10. (U) The road itself is fairly treacherous, except for a 30 km stretch of newly finished Turkish asphalt west of Darvaz. One Chinese truck's cargo had fallen off the mountain on a steep curve, blocking the road for several hours. The Tajik Ministry of Transportation reports that China is interested in helping to rebuild the road all the way from the Chinese border to Shagon but has not yet found funding for the project.

Khorog

¶11. (U) The capital of Gorno-Badakhshan, Khorog, is an energetic mountain town, reminiscent of Boulder, Colorado, with two universities, and a relatively educated population. Officially home to 20,000 people, but unofficially 50,000, Khorog's local Pamiri population engages in small trade and light industry. The accredited but poor Khorog State University now competes with the startup Aga Khan-funded University of Central Asia which teaches 300 local residents English, accounting, management and computer courses.

¶12. (U) Thanks to the Aga Khan Foundation, Pamir Energy keeps residents warm, the First MicroFinance Bank provides entrepreneurs with credit, and guests can stay at the comfortable Serena Hotel (Ref B). Commercial flights keep Khorog connected with the rest of Tajikistan all year, except for frequent weather delays.

¶13. (U) Meat, chicken, eggs, wheat, and rice are imported from China and Iran, as well as cement and building materials from China. Chinese traders are interested in buying some of the high-quality honey from the region, but local residents do not yet produce honey in quantities that would make the transactions worthwhile for the Chinese mega-market.

¶14. (U) The Gorno-Badakhshan region is officially autonomous, and the Tajik government requires international visitors to obtain a special permit to visit. Local residents told EmbOffs that the central government takes the revenues from these permits and hunting licenses and provides little to local residents. Tourism is a decidedly viable prospect here, where aside from Marco Polo sheep, the austere beauty of Khorog and the region could capture the imagination of world travelers.

Ishkashim to Langar - The Deep South

¶15. (U) Driving south from Khorog, the sprawling, wind-whipped Pyanj river valley dominates the northern edge of the Wakhan corridor from Ishkashim to Langar. Views of the Afghan Hindu Kush with its glaciers and Great Game-era earthen forts dot the landscape along the Tajik side of the border. Originally designed to separate two empires from encroaching on each other's zones of influence, crossing from Afghanistan to Tajikistan seems as easy as wading across sand bars in some areas. EmbOffs even saw small minivans in the very rockiest areas of the river valley, so vehicular traffic is possible straight up to the river in some parts.

¶16. (U) Ismaili-Shia shrines, topped with the horns of

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endangered Marco Polo sheep, and old water springs framed by dilapidated Soviet mosaics dot the landscapes. Vehicular traffic is at a minimum in these parts with the roads mostly punctuated by herders and the intermittent patrol of border guards, with or without weapons. Several large trucks were stuck in the drifted sand, blocking the roads in some areas.

¶17. (U) This area is known as one of the poorest in Gorno-Badakhshan, and the predominant activity along this stretch of the border was the harvesting of wheat crops, with the low land on both sides of the border road yielding surprisingly high amounts of arable land. There were a strikingly high number of male laborers in the field compared to villages in other parts of Tajikistan, where fields are dominated by female laborers. Most seemed ecstatic to receive a wave and a smile from far-too-infrequent passersby.

¶18. (U) Past Langar, at the confluence of the Pamir and Wakhan rivers, the border road turns northward and ascends steeply through a barren, treeless landscape towards the Khargush pass, ultimately linking up with the Khorog-Murgab road. The only sign of life on this 108 km stretch were the two conscript border guards at the Khargush checkpoint, roused from their evening meal. Rusting construction equipment, abandoned border towers and evidence of massive landslides completed the scene in

this deserted corner of Tajikistan.
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